“The Possession of Knowledge Carries an Ethical Responsibility.” Evaluate this claim.

The claim, I believe, suggests that people have an obligation to use the knowledge they have in the most ethical or moral way. This could be either sharing their knowledge to better a situation, or withholding it for the same reason. I believe that the possession of knowledge does carry an ethical responsibility to some extent.

The difficulty with this statement is that it is quite ambiguous in nature. It does not specify which knowledge is possessed (does all knowledge carry an ethical responsibility?), or to whom the ethical responsibility is owed. For example, it is difficult to say that all knowledge carries an ethical responsibility when knowledge covers all aspects of what a person understands. For example, trivial things such as knowing how to tie your shoelaces or brush your teeth are, technically, knowledge but cannot surely carry an ethical responsibility. And it is often difficult to assess to whom the responsibility is concerned with. For example, I see my friend cheating on a test and I know that unless he passes that test he will fail the entire class. Do I have an ethical responsibility to my friend to prevent him from getting into trouble and failing - or is my responsibility to tell the teacher because I know cheating is wrong?

This claim also brings up the issue of how far we take the responsibility. We can look, for example, at the invention of the atomic bomb which involves both history and the natural sciences. There were many people who were instrumental in the creation of the atomic bomb even if they were not directly involved. One such person is Albert Einstein. He was the first man to acknowledge just how much energy could be released from small amounts of matter (such as atoms) which is the basic technology used in creating atomic bombs. If we agree that knowledge does carry an ethical responsibility, then it stands to reason that Albert Einstein is, if not fully, in part responsible for the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in world war two. However, it could also be argued that Robert Oppenheimer and his team who actually manufactured the bombs are more ethically responsible for what occurred because they actually materialized their knowledge of the theories of the atomic bomb. And further still, would the pilots who actually dropped the bombs on the islands be most ethically responsible for the deaths that occurred as a result? They knew what they were doing and the destruction the bombs would cause and yet they still chose to release them.

I believe that each person who was involved in the invention of the nuclear bomb, including Albert Einstein, had an ethical responsibility. Kant’s theory (or deontological theory) says that the motive behind the incident is more important than the consequences that arise afterwards. Therefore, if the motive was wrong, the incident was ethically wrong regardless of what happens in the end. He also says that ethics are universal – that if something is wrong/right for one person, it must be deemed that way for everyone: no exceptions. The construction of the nuclear bomb, and its release on the islands of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which caused thousands of deaths was wrong – regardless of the outcome.

Other viewpoints may say that in fact, ‘the end justifies the means’ and that it was not wrong because the bombs ultimately ended world war two. This is called consequentialism and it says that the consequences outweigh the motives behind them. So even if the motives are immoral, if the end result is good and just it does not matter. This would support the manufacture of the atomic bomb as inevitably, the consequences (ending the war) did prevent a lot more deaths than were caused in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Another interpretation of the claim could be ‘knowledge is power’ and that with more knowledge comes more power and therefore more responsibility. A good example of this, looking at the Natural Sciences, is the advance in genetic screening of prenatal cells using amniocentesis or chorionic villus sampling. In both procedures, prenatal cells are removed and screened for the presence of abnormalities. Sometimes, these abnormalities include handicapping disorders such as Down syndrome and cystic fibrosis. This is one example that brings up a much disputed ethical dilemma. The parents are faced with the choice of whether they keep the child, possibly subjecting it to a lifetime of suffering or terminate the pregnancy and prevent this potential suffering before it can begin. With this knowledge, that they would not have had otherwise, they quite literally hold theirs and their unborn child’s fate in their hands.

This example also shows the ways in which reason and emotion are relevant to the subject area. In order for the parents to make a decision that is in the best interest of the child, they must balance reason and emotion. The parents must weigh up whether they would be able to bring a child that would be mentally or physically handicapped into their lives and whether the child would be happy if they did. This involves being able to provide the adequate medical and physical care resources needed for a lot of children born with these disabilities. Often at least one parent will need to stay at home full time to care for the child, and the expenses (of medical, physical therapy, and equipment bills) are often very high. If parents were using reason alone in their decision, they might see that it would be very difficult to adequately provide for a child with severe disabilities and may decide that the quality of life he or she would have would be very low. However, another major factor in their decision is emotion. Despite the reasoning behind why they might consider aborting the foetus, it becomes a lot more complicated when emotions are brought in. Mothers often form a strong connection with their child even before he/she is born, and having to make a decision to end a life, especially that of your own child would be almost impossible.

Looking again at the ethical implications of this gained knowledge, we can see how difficult it is to distinctly separate what is wrong and what is right as there are so many ‘grey’ areas in between. Looking back at Kant’s theory, we see that he suggests two things: that morals must be universal, and that the motives behind an action outweigh the consequences. If morals must be universal, it means that if it is acceptable for a person to do something, it must be acceptable for anyone in the world to do that thing at any time. Therefore, if parents are able to abort a child if it has a genetic disorder, it must be acceptable for any person to kill any person with a genetic disorder or anyone else at all. So, following this idea, it would be ethically wrong to abort the child regardless of the reason. However, if we look at the second part, the motive is more important than the consequence. So, if the motive behind aborting the child was a good one (that of preventing a life of suffering for him or her) then the consequence that follows, which is of course the death of the child, then the good motive is more important than the consequence.

As we have seen, the possession of knowledge can carry an ethical responsibility in some circumstances. It can often be difficult to decide on what is the right thing to do morally/ethically as there are so many grey areas and different ways of looking at a situation. Naturally, as human beings we try to make exceptions and ‘bend the rules’ to suit ourselves and to convince ourselves that what we are doing is morally acceptable. There are examples in history and the natural sciences of situations where the possession of knowledge does carry ethical responsibilities.